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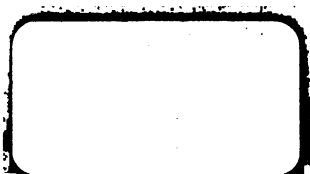
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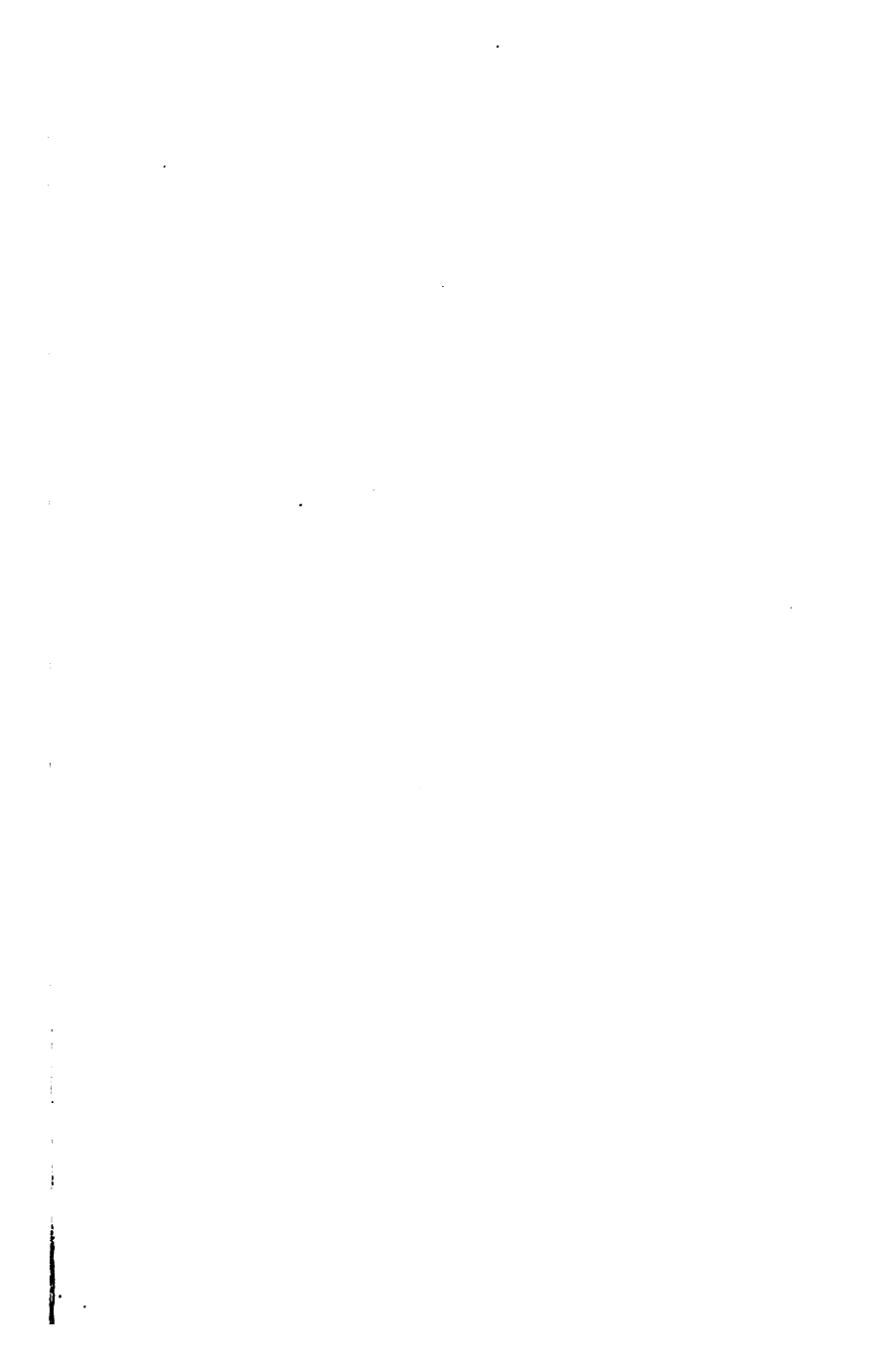
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**DO'S AND DON'T'S**  
*For the PLAYWRIGHT*

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# DO'S AND DON'T'S *for the* PLAYWRIGHT

A Manual  
For the Writer of Plays for  
Amateurs

BY  
FANNY CANNON

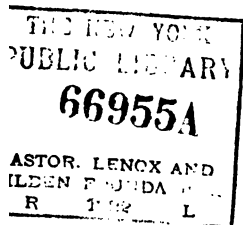
Author of

*"Casilda Comes Home," "What's In a Name?" "The  
Lady of the Opera House," "Writing and  
Selling a Play"; co-author of  
"The Mark of the Beast"  
and "Meow!"*



CHICAGO  
T. S. DENISON & COMPANY  
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## FOREWORD

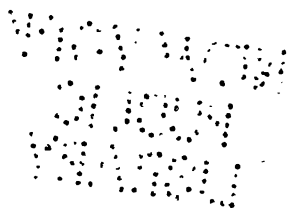
**A** MANUAL of this size can only touch briefly on a few points of a large subject. Nevertheless it is hoped that it will contain many valuable hints not only for the novice in play-writing, but for the more experienced writer desirous of preparing plays for the amateur performer, who is creating a demand all his own.

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By

FANNY CANNON



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# **FIRST PART**

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## **IN GENERAL**

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### **I**

In Harry Osborne's very able and comprehensive little manual, "How to Stage a Play," published by T. S. Denison & Company, he says there are four things that go to make up a successful amateur production, and the first of these is the play. I would amend this to say, especially for amateur companies, the first of these is the playwright.

The reason why the dramatist is of peculiar importance where the amateur is concerned will be readily understood. A company of professional players has often lifted a bad play into some semblance of success, certainly of amusement, through skillful portrayal of the various rôles. But, unless trained to an almost professional state by long association in many plays and many public performances, when a company of amateurs attempts a bad play it only becomes worse. And a good play, if it be beyond the powers of the average non-professional, is ruined.

Amateur theatricals have been growing steadily since the war. In fact it might almost be said that the war gave them their greatest impetus. The demand began to come in from cantonments for plays, not only for the townspeople to act for the soldiers, but chiefly for the soldiers to produce and act themselves. Different units of the Young Men's Christian Association and similar organizations took plays

with them to France, and the Overseas Theatre League called for more for its various companies in the A. E. F.

Then, too, those at home in cities and towns remote from New York, Chicago, and other big theatrical centers were not visited as frequently as usual by touring theatrical companies because of war conditions. The cry had gone out to keep up the *morale* of the country. So these various places began to put on their own entertainments, for the Red Cross, for local soldiers' benefits, and so on. It was found to be an excellent community method of reaching one's neighbors, of bringing all sorts of people together, taking them out of themselves during difficult periods; in short, it proved to be a modern and sophisticated equivalent of the old-time dances and pageants on the village green. Universities and schools, churches and hospitals, community houses and prisons have welcomed this healthy method of stimulating interest and awakening certain moral and psychological qualities. Naturally, having learned all this, a good thing is not being given up, now that the war is over; on the contrary, it is more popular than ever.

Therefore, since the business of publishing plays specifically intended for amateur abilities is steadily increasing it becomes necessary for the playwright desirous of meeting this demand to inform himself not only of the usual matters which are an essential part of every dramatist's equipment, but particularly of those which concern the amateur and his abilities and limitations.

There are several exhaustive books by well-known authorities, with which a manual of this size could not attempt to compete. Hence we will not try to

do more than merely touch on the most important features of play-writing in general, as a guide and introduction to further study and practice.

Do not think for one moment that the mere reading, or even study, of any book on play-writing is going to be more than a guide on how to begin. To learn how to write plays, you must write plays, and more plays, then re-write them, not once, but many times. Play-writing is not easy. Do not let any glib writer on the subject deceive you for a moment. Of course, as in all arts, practice and experience will help to bring the necessary knowledge of technique. This knowledge of the way to begin and to end, to plan and to write, finally becomes a part of one's mental processes, and the writing becomes easier, less beset with the many pitfalls into which the novice strays so readily. For every play produced I suppose there are hundreds written. Not all of these are by newcomers. Even the so-called successful playwright not only has failures but also has plays which managers do not accept.

So, do not think to find an infallible method for success in this or any other book, no matter how exhaustive. You will be helped, advised, and guided as far as may be, then you must go forward alone—until you are ready for more advice and guidance and healthy criticism.

## II

One of the first things of which the embryo dramatist must inform himself is what I might term the general geography of the stage. For the amateur actor, this "stage" is often only a space at one end of a parlor, without footlights, platform, scenery,

or curtain, and with only the most necessary accessories of furniture and properties. In fact, experienced players have sometimes given performances under just such conditions, though not in this day, it may be added, as members of a professional troupe, but in some affair staged for charity in which these players happened to be interested personally. The fact of such conditions being possible explains why in the catalogue of the play publisher there are many short plays requiring few characters, little scenery, and so on. Often those in which the scenery is described are so written that it can be dispensed with. In fact, two of the present writer's playlets were written to order for just such occasions, to be acted before women's clubs in hotel parlors, where all of the disadvantages of no dressing-rooms in the wings, no curtain or footlights, nothing but a low platform and the needed chairs, had to be taken into account in the play-writing.

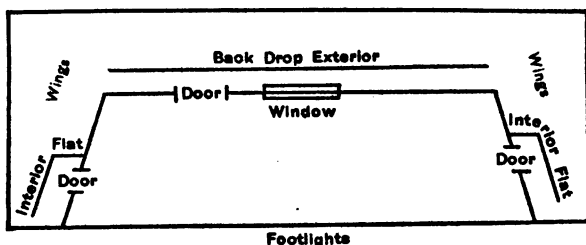
Hence, in informing himself as to the methods of the playwright, the author of plays for amateurs need not feel it necessary to start with long plays requiring scenery and costumes, but can begin by learning to meet the demand for shorter plays which the amateur will find easy to stage and act at short notice and without too much preparation.

Nevertheless, whether the play is short or long, acted in a barn during the summer vacation or in a rented theatre at the height of the season, the "stage" means that part of the room or enclosure on which the performance is given, and its "layout" is the same, as far as directions are concerned, in the manuscript prepared by the author.

A knowledge of the physical stage, therefore, with

its limitations and possibilities is one of the first of the mechanical or technical necessities of play-writing.

To help this matter of the stage and its various features, a series of extended definitions will be found at the end of this manual, explaining those terms and expressions used by the playwright in his manuscript and general work. I also include a diagram.



Stage Boxed-in for Interior Setting

In the manuscript of a beginner who is unfamiliar with the stage, the directions used had best be of the simplest and most general variety, else only confusion will result. Directions are always given from the point of view of the actor, as, in the last analysis, they are meant for him. His point of view is naturally with relation to his audience; the right side of the stage is the actor's right when facing front, and so on. Exits and entrances, even on a stage without scenery, are definitely fixed in each scene at certain points, through doors and other openings, whether imaginary or visible. Only in exteriors representing open squares or tree spaces can the characters enter from any point of the stage. The author usually writes with a diagram of the stage, as set

for the act upon which he is working, where it can be frequently consulted.

### III

So much for the mechanical stage. Whatever sort of play you write, you must not, dare not, ignore it. If your play is for amateurs, its every stage quality must be practical and simple. It is very rare indeed for an amateur company to wish to spend large sums of money in unusual or elaborate settings or lighting effects. As we are now coming to the story, bear this in mind in selecting and assembling your plot and characters.

All of the rules governing the writing of plays for Broadway are, or should be, observed in the construction of a play for amateurs. It is true, as a general thing, that the amateur plays to a less critical audience than does the regular theatrical company. It is therefore also true that certain things may be permitted in the play for amateurs which would be too tame for the blasé theatre-goer of Broadway. Both of these truths exist because of the general nature of the amateur company or club. The reason is plain. It should be obvious to the least discerning that the amateur who gives only a small part of his time and attention to acting cannot as a rule compete with the man or woman whose life work it is. The exception usually gives up his business and "goes on the stage."

It is this fact and this alone which causes the distinction between the professional and amateur play. There is no difference in technique; the difference is to be found in the subject chosen and the acting demands of the finished product.

## IV

The first important thing in writing the play, any play, is the story. Not all stories are suited to the play form. Selection is therefore necessary. Plays represent the dynamic phases of life, whether tragic or humorous. Events must be of such a nature as to reconcile us to their occurrence in the short period of the performance.

Also the story must deal with one complete episode or plot, with its beginning, its middle, and its end. Everything in the play, every character, every situation, must deal with the development of one main idea. This is the oft-mentioned Unity of Action.

At this point it might be well to refer to "The Unities" as set forth by Aristotle in his famous laws for writers. The three so-called Unities are the Unity of Time, of Place, and of Action. In the old Greek drama these were more or less rigidly adhered to. Today in the play and the short story, the Unity of Action remains as strict a rule as ever. The other two Unities are somewhat more elastic; nevertheless, the more nearly they are followed the stronger and more closely knit will be the resulting work. The Unity of Time insists that the episode must occur within one day; the Unity of Place, that it must occur in one place, frequently in one room.

From the foregoing it will appear that the play-form is at its best when compact. The story you have selected should be of one plot, capable of being fully told in the play-form as compactly as possible, and of dramatic or humorous importance.

A stage-plot, as a general rule, involves some sort of conflict, a "clash of wills" as someone has expressed it. This conflict or clash may be entirely

mental or psychological, as the struggle between two natures in one person; it may be moral, it may be physical. The conflict need not be serious. It may be of a wholly comedy aspect. But a story in which everybody agreed with everybody else, being at the same time entirely pleased with themselves, would not lend itself to the play-form. The conflict need not be intentional on the part of the characters. In fact some of the most amusing plays have been written around personalities utterly innocent of causing any trouble at all.

Modern plays no longer permit of the so-called sub-plot. This was a secondary and less important story running along with the major episode. It was often "comedy relief," injected into tragedies and heavy drama to offset the sombre tone of the rest. It is taboo today. If any change in tone or tempo is required to relieve the tension, that relief is a definite part of the main theme.

Your story must have what we term "action." This need not mean activity in the ordinary sense, but that quality of "something doing" which may be active, or present in the dialogue as an under-current. It is the forward movement of the plot, a constant sense that we are getting somewhere.

We will take up the various types of story suitable for amateur performance when we come to deal more particularly with that phase of the work.

## V

Having reached the decision that your chosen story is suitable, you have found yourself creating certain characters as parts of its development. You may add to these as you go along, or eliminate a

few; but people you must have, since your play concerns people. In fiction the author speaks quite as often as do his characters. In the play, the characters alone do the talking. It is most important, therefore, that they should be the right characters. ✓

It is not at any time a question of just giving "lines" and speeches to a number of people and telling your story through their questions and answers. The people must be individuals, and what they say must be in keeping with that individuality. You can create any types or characters you choose, so long as they are human and not automaton. But once created, you must not let them do or say things such people would find impossible to do or say. See to it, since you are responsible, that you have just enough people, and of just the right kind, to tell your story for you. They must be consistent and simple. That does not mean simple-minded, but holding to one type or individuality throughout your play. In life there are many seemingly complex and uncertain personalities. These, however, are difficult to use in a novice's play, so we keep to the most noticeable and salient characteristics of the people telling the story. Subtle characters, as a rule, are exceedingly difficult to act, and therefore beyond the ability of the average amateur player.

It will be only necessary to touch briefly on the matter of the names you give them. Descriptive nomenclature, as it is called, has gone into disuse; for instance, such names as "Simon Skinflint," to represent a miser, appear so infrequently as to be noticeable when they do occur in some burlesque or parody. In general, however, the stronger characters have names of dignity and strength, and *vice*

*versa*. Suppose "Lady Macbeth" had been named "Flossie"! Also remember that the names, or at least part of them, are to be spoken aloud by other people in the play. Do not call two characters by names similar in sound, unless the resulting confusion is intentional. Do not give any character a name which will sound funny in a scene meant to be serious.

## VI

Up to this point you are only realizing your story in a general way. You have decided that it is of a type which will make a play and have thought of the characters which are part of it. It is at this stage that the scenario begins to take shape. This is your chart of procedure.

Not all playwrights use a detailed scenario from which to work, but there must be some sort of plan, or synopsis, or preliminary plotting out. You must determine on certain stages of development. In other words, you divide your plot into acts, deciding on how much of your story can be told logically in each one. The more you plan all this before you begin to write, the easier the actual writing will be. To start in and write your play without any idea of where the dialogue will lead you will certainly land you in difficulties, even if the result is not so bad as to take you nowhere in particular.

On the other hand, do not be afraid to change your plan at any stage of the writing, if you can find a better way. There are no hard and fast rules about this planning and plotting. But whatever changes you make, keep them consistent throughout. If in Act Two you find you can best tell your story by changing what started out to be drama into a

farce, all right; farce let it be. Go back and overhaul Act One to bring it into line with the farce idea.

## VII

If you are planning a one-act play, a form popular with amateurs, be sure your story is one capable of proper development in this shorter form. One-act plays usually run, in acting time, from fifteen to forty-five minutes. The longer one-act plays, as a rule, are of slightly more dramatic or serious nature. Half-an-hour is a usual favored length for a one-act play. This necessitates a concise story, quickly and compactly told, complete with its beginning, its middle, and its end.

These three periods of development, used in all plots, whether for short or long plays, point out one reason why the three-act play is a more natural division than the four- and five-act dramas. In any case, the plays of more than three acts are almost always the more dramatic, or tragic, or melodramatic writings, and are therefore not advisable for the amateur.

There happen to have been a number of successful plays for amateurs with but two acts. Such are frequently given on programs where the play is only part of the bill. It may be remarked that the two-act play rarely appears on the professional stage except in musical comedy. When it does, it is usually a one-act play divided into two scenes to show the passage of a certain length of time. The two-act play is in relatively small demand.

But whether the play is in one or five acts, it can be divided generally into those three steps of development: The beginning, the middle, and the end; or the

exposition, the rise to the climax, and the working out of this climax to the explanation or finale.

### VIII

Let us pause here for a moment to formulate four general rules of play-writing, all of them really self-evident. First, know your medium, the stage, its limitations, its possibilities, its appeal to both eye and ear; second, have a clear and single story to tell; third, be sure this story is of one plot and suitable for the play-form; and fourth, learn how to put your story on the stage, how to turn your plot into a play to be acted by living actors.

In dealing with the scenario or plan, we are beginning to do something with Rule Four. And now a valuable ingredient in your own make-up steps in. This is the ability to visualize, to see your plot alive, being acted out, your characters moving about, speaking, laughing, crying. You can more than see them, you can hear them, in that inner sight which knows them real. You are not writing words, but voicing people's thoughts, directing their actions, making them smile or suffer—and you can see them doing it all, at every stage of your work, once you have brought them into existence.

This most necessary quality is not natural to everyone, though it is safe to assume it to be developed in some degree in those who possess any gift for writing. Most people can either acquire it or enlarge what slight beginning they may have by practice. You can start with memory. Recall some scene you have just lived through, and "see" it as you saw it then. Next, in your mind dramatize the scene, enlarge on it, change it, always seeing the

people, the room and so on. You can develop this idea in any direction you choose. The reason this quality is necessary is that you must never forget that your play must be practical, capable of being acted, and you must be able to visualize it as being acted all the time you are writing. If you do not see and hear your people with every speech, every line of business you set down, you are not going to achieve a real play.

## IX

The events in a play must be shown in their proper order. This is not the place to discuss the unusual or odd plays which seem to work backward, though, in the last analysis, these, too, might be said to show their events in what the author has determined is their proper order. If certain events occur it must be because certain other events preceded. They grow out of each other in a sort of chain of events, or rather, a sequence of events. We are therefore taken step by step to the denouement.

The first stage of development, or the first set of sequences, the beginning or exposition, is now our subject of discussion.

The story you have in your mind has a beginning. But the beginning as you have thought about it may not be the beginning of the play. You must decide on the point where you wish events to begin to happen on the stage. There are things you can actually show, there are others you can only briefly touch on, and others are merely spoken about. There are certain things which happened before the curtain went up on that particular point of the story which you have determined is the right place to start.

These things occurring beforehand have been called the "Conditions Precedent." They are the matters about which we must learn something, but as they occurred before the play began, we must learn of them in the way the stage provides.

You are now putting into practice one of the sternest rules of stage-craft. Not one phase of the plot which cannot be mentioned or shown by your actors can be part of your play. In fiction, you can give long descriptions telling us all about who the people are, where they came from, and why they are here. In a play, the people themselves must tell us that. On the program, you may tell us to a limited extent who they are in the cast of characters, and also the program can show time and locality. More than that is out of place in a manuscript. You may write enough "business" to inspire player and director to a better showing forth of qualities and appearances. But your Conditions Precedent, when necessary, must reach us solely through the stage presentation.

Nor can the players talk about these earlier matters as if giving information to the audience. If ✓ Mary's father has divorced his wife, and the wife has married again before the play begins, and if the fact of the divorce and remarriage is important to plot development, then the "scandal" can be given as a bit of gossip by one character who knows about it, to someone new to the neighborhood. The information must come at the right place and in a perfectly natural manner. It is part of the exposition, since a knowledge of it is necessary to our comprehension of what is to follow. The skillful dramatist starts us right off in the midst of things without our being

aware he is actually explaining who everybody is and what are the causes which have brought them together. A first act is nearly all exposition, though the necessary information about things and people may be scattered adroitly throughout the entire act instead of being massed in the first few scenes. In a one-act play, of course the exposition would be brief and come at the very beginning.

However, sometimes plot development may require the withholding of a certain piece of information as to who somebody is. The right place for that information to enter the play is where it will produce the best effect, whether it be the first act or the last.

At the same time, while the exposition is the greater part of the first act, this same act must have latent in it all that follows—a speech here, a bit of business there, some trait of character, or the various relationships—all these must hold the possibilities for all which is to come later. That is why you have brought them together.

In short, your plot begins to develop from the first scene; the exposition has started the ball rolling. The various characters are being introduced to us in their proper order and in the right way.

✓ That does not mean we have to see all of the characters in Act One. But we often hear something about people we are going to meet later. On the other hand some characters have a certain mysterious quality which is part of the plot, and these do not appear until quite late in the play for purposes of dramatic effect. Or a few minor characters may have no reason for appearing until they are needed, as the policeman who arrests the villain or the messenger who brings on a telegram.

## X

We are now working toward the climax. This crisis is the place where everything seems tangled up, the "tying of the knot," as Aristotle called it. In comedy or farce it is the point where everybody in the cast is bewildered or fooled, or where some schemer has succeeded in "putting it over." Whatever it is which has caused the crisis, humorous or tragic, it is of such a nature that another act is needed to untangle the knot, or explain the result, or foil the villain, or whatever your conclusion is.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the conclusion must be kept in mind from the beginning. I have said it was latent in Act One. It must be a possible conclusion to follow the dilemma or climax you have built. This does not mean you, as author, always know just exactly the manner in which you will write your conclusion; but it does mean that you know what it is to be. While writing, you often find a better way to do a thing than you had originally planned; but you know, or should have an idea, what you intend to have happen as the ending of your plot. It will not be feasible to pursue this subject further, else this will not be a manual but a two-hundred page volume. When you really begin to write you will also begin to understand.

In any case, while we are working toward this climax, it must be of such a nature as to make for a logical conclusion when the time comes. Yet it must not be so simple that your conclusion is too obvious or inevitable as to details. If it is a real tangle or crisis, the working to the conclusion can be just as interesting or even surprising as all that precedes. In general, the audience knows that it is "all

coming out right," and they know which characters deserve to triumph, and so on, so there is not always any great surprise. But, if lacking surprise, it must satisfy as being a real and logical solution.

Before the actual solution or finale is reached, that is, before the last few scenes of the play, it is quite possible to give a new twist to events. Yet, no matter how new or unexpected this novel turn of affairs may be, it still must be contained as a possibility in all that preceded it.

You cannot have a surprise finish which is out of keeping with the characters or the plot or the surroundings. You are not writing Greek drama which permitted the sudden arrival of some friendly god or goddess to set everything straight. It is all there in your own plot, your own people. A surprise that is only a surprise, injected for novelty and without preparation, is not a part of good play-writing.

## XI

We will suppose, now, that your plan is complete, or perhaps even the first transcript of a play roughly sketched in; it will be well to review it throughout with the idea of making sure of certain things.

Every play has its seen and its unseen side. Fiction can relate in full; a play shows only certain aspects. These must be the situations and circumstances capable of dramatic presentation. You may have a good plot, but if you choose the wrong situations to express it, you will fail. The power of right selection is a quality of the dramatic instinct.

The unseen side of a play is that part of it which reaches us as information of past or present events through the dialogue; the seen side is, of course, the

side we see acted before our eyes. Here, too, is where the ability to visualize will be a potent guide. You must get all of your story "over" to the audience through the medium of the actors and their surroundings. Only those phases of it best suited to that medium can be shown; the rest must be adroitly conveyed to us through the dialogue.

Another point is concerned with the various situations. Properly arranged in sequence, each situation arises as the result of certain other matters which have already occurred. Occasionally it is necessary to "plant" a situation beforehand. By this we mean any preliminary emphasis on information or characterization. If certain things are going to happen later, they may be of such a nature that we need to be prepared for them, for some reason of plot development. In preparing a MS. we may reach a place where we find some new development or unexpected turn creeping in. If this seems to us good and useful to the plot, we may find it advisable to go back over earlier scenes and "plant" the seed for this newly evolved situation. You may "plant" for later situations as you go along, or you may have to go back over the MS. to do it; it may be managed by speeches here and there, by stage business, or by other means of getting our minds ready for the situation toward which we are building. Not all situations need this planting; some must have it.

Just one illustration from a Broadway production will help explain this matter to those who may not see the point. The hero is trying to make the heroine believe that a certain terrible experience through which she has just passed is only a dream, as she had collapsed into unconsciousness immediately and

had slept long under an opiate administered by the physician. She is only partly convinced of the dream idea, yet anxious to believe him. She suddenly remembers that toward the end of the "dream" she had telephoned for help. If there is a record of such a call, it was not a dream but an actuality. She rushes to the telephone, and is relieved to learn that there was no such call listed, and her horrible plight had been only an unusually vivid nightmare. A friend of the hero, sharing in this plot to save her reason, murmurs: "Thank God!" "And a fifty-dollar bill!" answers the hero. No other explanation is given; but we do not need it. It had been "planted" in the preceding act by the hero going to the telephone and finding out from the hotel operator her hour for going off duty, and asking if he may see her in regard to something to her advantage. At the time we do not stop to think why he does this; things are moving too fast; it may even pass out of memory for the moment. But when we see the heroine rush to the instrument to ask the fatal question, we at once recall the hero's earlier message and know exactly what he has done. It saved an explanation at a point in the play when explanations would have clogged the action. We know that the operator has been bribed to take this call off the list. The situation has been skillfully planted.

There are times in any play when it becomes necessary to slightly delay action, or withhold information until some more dramatic point. In the attempt to do this, do not make a frequent mistake of novices, who, in their efforts to retard, wander off into irrelevancy. ✓

We have touched only briefly here and there on the dialogue. If your characters are distinct and human, real people, and your plan clear in your mind, the dialogue is perhaps the easiest part of a difficult job. It should be natural, colloquial, with whatever of local color or dialect its place of action may require. When the subject is taken up again with particular regard to the amateur actor, other suggestions will be made.

## SECOND PART

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### IN PARTICULAR

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#### I

In dealing with the play intended for amateur performance, a number of things must be taken into consideration at the very beginning. Some of these were touched on in the First Part, but they will be mentioned again as the need arises, because some emphasis is necessary.

The first thing to remember is the acting power of an average amateur cast. I said "average." Amateur talent ranges all the way from the awkward beginner without one glimmer of histrionic impulse to the experienced player in many public performances who is really ready to take the next step to the professional stage, as many of them have done. Some amateur clubs, especially those in large cities, are well-organized, have kept together for a number of seasons, and pay experienced directors. In fact, practically none of the more pretentious performances by amateurs in New York are given without the assistance of the professional director who becomes also the coach for the less talented performers.

In the smaller cities and towns, too, there are some dramatic clubs which, with amateur direction as well as amateur talent, have achieved considerable skill through constant work and careful study.

But the publisher must cater to the rank and file, and the larger part of his clientèle is the ordinary amateur who likes to put on plays and act in them.

As these plays must be made amusing and interesting for the audiences who come to see them and often pay out perfectly good money to do so, the general lack of real acting experience, except in a few cases, must be accepted and considered.

Another consideration, aside from acting experience, is the financial end. Amateurs are not, like the professional manager, investing money in their own business enterprises. If much money must be spent it comes out of the pockets of the players themselves. Most performances are given for charity, or benefits, or for some such purpose, since the actor is not paid. Therefore expenses must be met from the proceeds. It is not good business to have the expenses so high that the net proceeds amount to little or nothing.

For that reason, expense must be taken into account by the playwright in preparing his story. Do not call for elaborate structures requiring special building, such as grand staircases, overhanging balconies, trap-doors, and kindred accessories. On the other hand, if you are familiar with stage possibilities you can often suggest ways and means to "fake." Some years ago, when the Irish Players first came to the States, a great deal of praise was earned by the effectiveness of some of their simplest sets. As an instance, the sole furniture in "The Rising of the Moon" was a barrel, with a "Reward" placard tacked to it. The rest of the stage was hidden in mysterious darkness. One strong light fell from the flies, representing moonlight. This struck the barrel and whatever figures came under its rays. The effect was of a lonely wharf on the bank of the river: Our imaginations had been kindled to make us believe it.

You recall in the First Part I said if you were inexperienced it was best to be general in your stage directions. That means that you had best not try to use the technical and abbreviated directions which appear in the professional manuscript. You can describe the room as you have visualized it, saying "At the back," or "In the rear," or "To the right," always remembering it is the actor's right you mean. If your scene has only one door or exit, after you have told us where this is, you need only say: "Harold exits," or "David enters."

Describe your people as you want them to look. Tell us just what you want them to do, as well as what they must say. If you will always keep at your elbow for consultation a plot diagram of your stage, with the doors and furniture arranged as you wish, this matter of setting down the "business" will be simpler. The stage director will need it as his "prompt-book."

Do not include instructions which cannot be followed. I remember reading a manuscript recently in which the business instruction read: "Having finished washing the dishes, Ruth enters." Neither before nor after her entrance was anything said about dishes, so the audience did not receive a hint as to what she was doing, nor was it important. How *could* she look as if she had finished the dishes when we never knew she was cleaning them?

Do not use such abbreviations as "R 3" or "L 1." These expressions date back to the days when scenery was shoved on to the stage in grooves. The abbreviations mark definite positions well recognized by the professional player, but of no use to the amateur.

Business directions are always written in the present tense.

## II

Next we take up the story. The selection is not as wide as for the professional stage, though there is no fixed rule about it. And many of the restrictions mentioned here hold for Broadway as well.

Let me say at once that though this manual is dealing with plays for publication as contrasted with those for the big theatres, it must be clearly understood that the play meant *solely* for publication, to be read and not acted, the so-called "closet-drama," is not being considered at any point. The plays under discussion in this manual are seeking a publisher and through him, the actor, whether professional or amateur. Though published, they are plays to be acted. With that fact settled, there need be no misunderstanding.

In writing for publication, it should be remembered that the publisher hopes to keep on selling his plays for years. Anything of ephemeral interest is naturally not to be thought of. Questions of the moment, passing fads, entirely local issues cannot be used. Nor should political nor religious controversies be brought in. That does not mean that you must not write a play which has a politician or a minister as characters, if there is humor or general interest in the plot. But it must not be partisan nor controversial in any way, or such as to give offense to those of contrary opinions.

Do not use depressing themes, sickness, degeneracy, immorality. Write of pleasant things, exciting things; you may even touch on pathetic things. But you must remember that most of the people who get

up amateur theatricals are young people; if they should happen to want to play Maeterlinck's "Death of Tintagile," which I very much doubt, they will go straight to Maeterlinck. It will not do *you* any good to try to write something similar.

Costume plays are not much in demand by amateurs. An occasional Bible story for some church affair, an historical play for some school, when scenery and costumes are "faked" or home-made; these are about all. Costumes are expensive to rent, and few amateurs care to undertake it.

Do not select a story which will require a big "star" part. Not only are few amateurs capable of carrying a play, as is often the responsibility of the star, but it does not allow of sufficient importance being given to the other players. Amateurs like plays in which most of the actors are important, so that all may have something to do. This is one reason why many of the biggest New York successes would be absolutely hopeless for amateur companies. There is nearly always a star part entailing great strain and nervous reactions for one actor, and many of the minor characters are too minor to interest amateurs. Between ourselves, they do not interest professionals; but *they* are paid for it. And the butcher's bills must be met.

It should be obvious from the foregoing that stories must be avoided whose portrayal puts too great a strain on the actor's qualifications.

The chief drawback with the amateur is his self-consciousness, not only before an audience but even at rehearsal. It is easier for him to lose some of this attitude, or even make capital of it, in the plays along comedy lines, than in a serious effort. There-

fore comedies and farces are always in demand. If plays are of the comedy-drama variety, that is, those with serious portions, these points should be of short duration. They can be serious, they should not be tragic, and the "happy ending" is much the best for all plays.

Emotional or "big acting" scenes should be very few. My own experience as spectator at amateur performances would cause me to say, there should be none. But as there are clubs which have among their members the occasional amateur of ability, use the emotional scene if you must, but sparingly, I beg of you. And do not let it be a scene of such importance that the play stands or falls by it.

The same holds with love scenes. Unless the play is being given on a real stage with all the distance and illusion of footlights, grease paint and a darkened auditorium, the amusement of an audience composed of admiring relatives and friends at such a scene is apt to be both audible and disconcerting, even if the players themselves have entirely overcome their self-consciousness. So I would suggest that the love scenes, if necessary, and unless farcical in intention, be of the merest touch-and-go variety.

### III

You divided your story into acts and sequences. Here we meet with another restriction. You will notice, by the way, that these various restrictions and limitations are apt to make writing for amateurs a rather exacting task. Though somewhat different, it is not easier than work for the professional theatre. The exception might be in the greater demand for

shorter plays and material. It sometimes takes a few days' less work; that is all.

To change a stage-setting between the acts takes time. In amateur theatricals it takes a good deal of time. Therefore, one setting throughout the play is best. There should never be more than two and both should be simple. Do not have a change of scenery *during* an act. It is done professionally, where stagehands are rehearsed and used to working quickly. But it is not done often. *Never* is the word for the amateur. If a change of costume is demanded for any player during an act, see to it that there is enough business and dialogue to give him or her time to make the change. Amateurs are not as expert in making rapid changes in clothing as are professional actors. And even professionals must have time.

For preference, choose for your subject comedy rather than pathos, humor rather than serious emotion, joy rather than sorrow.

#### IV

Another point which attracts the amateur looking for material is the cast of characters. How many, and of what variety? As a general rule, it has been found that the balanced cast appeals most: Four men, four women, and so on. No one knows why, unless in small coteries they like to flock in couples. Whenever there is an excess of one sex over the other, it should be feminine. Undoubtedly, there are more women and girls who enjoy dressing up and acting than there are men. A play with more men than women has hardly a chance; the exceptions might be in the case of some male college, or similar outfit, in which men play feminine parts. But as these vehicles

are often written by the boys themselves, the market is not great.

So much for numbers.

In type, the preference should be for youthful characters. If older types enter the play, they should not be of too eccentric a variety, as the average young amateur is hardly equal to the impersonation. Besides, character make-up requires practice and skill. Unless an expert is engaged to make up the faces of the cast, as sometimes happens, the result is apt to be bad. In the case of male characters, wigs and beards help. With women, oddities in clothes and hair-dressing make for characterization. If the play is comedy, these effects should not be difficult. But the use of grease paint for lines and shadows on the face, in unaccustomed hands, is apt to be a messy and spotty job. Of course, some clubs or communities are able to call on more mature players. So there is no actual insistence on an entire cast of juvenile roles.

The characters should be as true to ordinary life as possible; not one amateur in a thousand could give an even passable performance of "Hyde" in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," or of "Hedda" in "Hedda Gabler." Such work should not be expected of them by the writer for the amateur stage.

## V

I said, in the First Part, that if the plan was clear and the characters of distinct individuality in your own mind, the writing of the dialogue was the easiest part of a difficult job. Perhaps I would better have said: The least difficult part of a never-easy job.

The dialogue in a play for amateurs must share

with the professional play a number of qualities. In addition, there are the usual restrictions.

It must be as natural as possible, without being rambling, prosy or incoherent. Though colloquial, it must get us somewhere. It must not be ranting, or didactic, or stilted. You are not writing a composition, but a play with lines to be spoken aloud.

If a character is of a pedantic type, the stilted lines are all right for him; they become a part of characterization. I am referring to the dialogue as a whole.

The sentences should be capable of easy rendering aloud. They must not be too long or involved, unless your obscurity is intentional at some point of the play.

The words should always be such as the tongue takes easily. Unwieldy words are as bad as unwieldy sentences.

Remember the action is more important than the talk, and, however witty or interesting it may be, do not let the dialogue halt the action.

Lengthy speeches are especially out of place in the amateur play. Even in the professional play they require skillful handling to avoid being tiresome. It is usually possible to break up a speech which threatens to be too long, by interruptions from others of "business," or brief remarks, and so on. But a long speech in which a player takes the center of the stage and talks while the others stand about and listen had best be let severely alone.

Use slang if it helps a characterization, but in moderation. It is a thing very easy to overdo. It seems hardly necessary to caution against vulgarity or profanity. They are absolutely not to be thought of.

Remember that your dialogue is not a series of questions and answers, after the fashion of the school reader or the recitation book. That is not a play and was never meant to be.

Do not introduce entirely irrelevant discussions with no bearing on the plot, nor jokes nor puns which do not concern us. Puns are bad at any stage; that is, for the legitimate play. Later we will speak of the side-branches, where puns and irrelevant jokes have their place.

At every stage of your dialogue writing, remember that it is carrying forward the plot. Though seemingly spontaneous, you are carefully planning it with that one purpose in view.

It has been said there is a distinct preference for comedy. This does not mean that every line spoken must be comic, but that the action is of a comedy or gay order. Nevertheless, since there is an occasional touch of pathos, or even drama, allowable in the play for amateurs, a few words will dispose of two effects which must not be permitted to creep in. If your story has been planned properly these effects should not occur, because you have already been warned against them. But sometimes while writing, the temptation may be strong, so again the warning is given.

Do not insert anywhere in the play a scene of extreme emotional intensity. Not one amateur in hundreds could manage it. The effect, in my experience, is usually to produce laughter rather than thrills or tears. The amateur cannot use such plays, nor is the publisher looking for them. He may, in some exceptional cases, publish a few in a whole catalogue in which an occasional such scene occurs, because he

must cater to all of the public, and there *are* amateur players here and there who are equal to the task and are glad of an opportunity to display their talents.

The other forbidden effect is much more positive in its inhibition. Scenes of passion are to be strictly avoided. The reasons are too obvious to require explanation.

Your play may require dialect. Learn something about the kind you are going to use. Be sparing of dialect parts until you have acquired some skill in writing and characterization.

## VI

Now for the "soliloquy" and "aside." In former days these were continually used. There is no space here to go into the reasons. In the modern drama, they are used either not at all, or in a degree so slight as hardly to be recognized as the same thing.

In the old days, the "aside" was a remark addressed either directly to the audience as in comedy, or to the empty air; it was a remark not meant to be heard by the other characters, whose presence was thus entirely ignored. Today, one character may address a remark to another which is not meant to be overheard by others present on the stage. This speech, in the play manuscript, would be prefaced thus: "John (aside to Tom)," and the remark would follow.

The nearest approach to the old-fashioned "aside" would be some audible exclamation such as any ordinary person might speak aloud under stress. If you or I in our own homes were faced with some sudden catastrophe at a time when thought was difficult, we would be quite likely to say aloud: "What am I going to do!" or something similar, though utterly alone at

the moment. If a thing is natural to the occasion, in real life, it can be used in a play.

A soliloquy is longer. It is the sort of thing injected into the older plays to let us know what thoughts were passing through the speaker's mind. Today we prefer to *see* the actor think, through the medium of his expression and movements. Hamlet's soliloquy is a case in point. Here is a character following a train of thought through a long speech. It proves one reason why Shakespeare's form is not a good model for the writer of modern plays. His plot-building and presentation are supreme; he was an actor, of and in the theatre. Had not the soliloquy been a fashion of his day and many days thereafter, make no doubt that he would have written his masterpieces without it.

## VII

Plays are divided into two great classes: Tragedy and Comedy. There all real classification ends. The divisions are of the haziest variety. One class runs into another in a way defying the pigeon-hole. At one end would be pure tragedy such as the "Medea" of Euripides; at the other end would be pure farce. Pure tragedy rarely gets into the modern play. When it does it is usually of foreign importation.

We will therefore have to attempt another division: Serious and Humorous. This is better, but it still does not get us very far, for the serious plays have comedy elements and happy endings, while the humorous plays often have pathetic scenes.

In the serious section, however, we can include tragedy, drama, and melodrama. In the humorous section, comedy and farce. Then there are the

hybrids: Comedy-drama, farce-comedy, tragi-comedy (whatever that is), and so on.

Also we have the offshoots of the humorous elements: Musical comedy, vaudeville, minstrel shows, with monologues, skits, slap-stick, and all the rest.

Nor must we forget the one-act play, the chief standby of the amateur, which may belong in any of the foregoing classifications. Let us see what we can do with them.

We can dismiss quickly the tragic section as entirely unsuited to the amateur performer, and therefore of no use to the publisher of such plays.

With a few exceptions we could say almost the same of drama, using the word in its narrow sense rather than its larger interpretation; for "drama" is the word applied to the whole subject of compositions meant to be acted. In its more limited meaning playwrights and actors use it to classify the play of serious purpose, of mental conflict, of problems, or emotional crises. Since it may have a happy ending and frequent comedy touches, it is not tragedy. But it is not the class of play the wise amateur chooses for an entertainment.

Melodrama may be defined best by lifting the definition from the dictionary; it covers the subject: It is "a drama with a romantic story or plot and startling situations and incidents." Also, most melodramas have a great deal of the comedy element, which is knit closely into the story. It usually involves crime of some sort, with a villain, and often a "villainess," as part of the ingredients.

There are several reasons why it must be put in the undesirable column. It is, as a rule, an expensive type of play to produce, because of changes in

scenery, lighting effects, and length. A melodrama usually runs five acts, seldom less than four. The cast generally runs to more men than women. Last, it requires skill to keep it within the limits of plausibility, both in regard to the writing and the acting. Melodrama has a strange affinity for farce; so much so, that the term "melodramatic" contains within it something of bombast and pretense. Bombast and pretension can be excellent farce material at times.

So it will be seen while drama and melodrama can be used by amateurs, they rarely are.

### VIII

A comedy is a play of life's less strenuous moods. Though it may contain touches of pathos, the laugh is never far from the tear. It is, perhaps, more nearly human and "every-day" than any other class. It has its gay moments, and its serious ones; the fun may range all the way from the line or situation eliciting the quiet chuckle to those provoking the roar of laughter. It always ends happily.

The comedy-drama is a combination of the foregoing with the more complex situations of drama.

Needless to say comedy is a frequent choice of the amateur looking for material, and he gets both profit and enjoyment from it.

When we come to farce we take up a play-form difficult both to write and to act. Yet since it is a form popular with amateur players, it is well worth study and work. Though difficult to act, it has certain advantages for the player. The frequent absurdity of lines and situations helps to gloss over much awkwardness, and helps eliminate that *bête-noire* of the amateur, self-consciousness. On the other hand, its

acting difficulties lie in the necessity for frequent and careful rehearsing and the need for perfect teamwork, with quick action, no waits, no delay in taking up cues, no slackening in the apparent spontaneity of the whole.

Farce is distinguished from comedy in that it is dominated by its situations rather than its characters. In true farce, the people are all more or less the victims of circumstances. Misunderstandings are rife throughout, and everybody is most uncomfortable and unhappy. Why is it funny, then? Because the situations are exaggerated, the circumstances grotesque and absurd. Nothing really tragic is involved, and at the end everybody is perfectly innocent and happy again. Farce, more than any other play-form, follows closely all of the three Unities.

## IX

With the one-act play, we run the entire gamut of the drama. It can be anything from tragedy to farce. Therefore the same restrictions hold as in the longer play, when writing for the amateur.

As the acting-time of this form is of short duration, the story must be one which can be clearly told in that time. It must begin at once, require little exposition, get to its climax quickly and terminate at just the right point. Naturally the story cannot be one requiring gradual development. The fewer characters you use the better. A frequent number for the one-act play is two persons. But in the play for amateurs it is not necessary to insist on the small cast for reasons of expense, as would be the case when each person must receive a salary.

## X

Musical comedy manuscripts, unless written by authors who are thoroughly familiar with amateur producing requirements and limitations, are foredoomed to rejection.

The average writer pictures a musical comedy as rich in scenic and costume investiture, and devises a play which calls for lavish staging. This is all right for the professional manager, who may spend thousands of dollars in producing his show. But for amateurs the musical comedy, as well as the non-musical play, must be the kind that can be staged with utmost economy as to scenery and costumes.

Moreover, a show that requires a special musical score is very costly to publish and the market for it is relatively small. A publisher is not likely to invest heavily in a book that promises to be a slow seller, no matter how excellent the play itself may be.

If you are determined to write a musical comedy for amateurs, your best course is to place it in a conventional scene with everyday costumes, and make the story complete without the musical numbers, suggesting merely the types of songs to be interpolated that will be adequate and suited to the story.

## XI

The minstrel show is an exceedingly popular form of amateur entertainment. In the ordinary sense, however, minstrel shows are not "written," they are put together.

✓ The usual minstrel show is divided into three parts; a first-part, made up of chorus and end-men, with songs, jokes, and cross-fire dialogue; an olio, which

is something akin to a short vaudeville show, recitations, skits, tricks, specialties of various kinds, whatever local talent affords; and an afterpiece, which is usually a rollicking farce, as funny and quick-moving as possible.

All that a publisher would be likely to be interested in, therefore, would be afterpieces, some brisk skits, and perhaps a collection of good cross-fire dialogue for the end-men, jokes, and "gags." If any playlets are used in the olio, they are farces, and need not have been especially written for minstrel shows.

In a successful minstrel show the jokes and dialogue must be up to the minute. Jokes taken from books and papers run the risk of being stale. Therefore, a collection of jokes and cross-fire dialogue should be as original as the writer can make it. "Cross-fire," it may be stated, is the dialogue between interlocutor and end-men.

The best chance for the writer is to devote himself to the afterpiece, the skits and farces, suggesting their suitability for minstrel shows. Most of these afterpieces are blackface, and are therefore written in "coon" dialect, as known to the stage.

The skits are very short, made-up of quick question-and-answer dialogue, and are for two people. These usually are a "straight" part, or "feeder," and a comedian.

## XII

In touching on vaudeville at this point, it may seem that we are wandering aside from the expressed intention of dealing with the writer of plays for amateurs, since vaudeville is a professional milieu. But "there's a reason," or rather two—one for the amateur actor, and one for the author.

The amateur often likes the type of "act" used in vaudeville, especially in minstrel shows, and fits it to his own uses very well. The author, finding writing for professional vaudeville, under the present system of leasing and selling "acts," most unsatisfactory, unless he has a reputation big enough to warrant his demanding his own terms, can still write such acts for a publisher.

The popular type for amateurs is clean burlesque, or brisk and vivacious farce. It is short—say from fifteen to twenty minutes. It may have two or more characters. For amateurs the number is not so limited as in the "profession," as there is no question of salary involved. It is usually of a somewhat more sophisticated type than the one-act farce or comedy used at church or parlor entertainments. But, for amateurs especially, it must not step over the line into vulgarity, and the faintest hint of salacity kills it with the publisher.

"Slap-stick" farce is of a rougher quality than the preceding, and is more suited to be played entirely by men. It is apt to be of a rough-and-tumble variety, and perhaps is not so easy a type for the amateur actor to carry off well.

Monologues for vaudeville, and for similar places in amateur shows, are of two types. The more artistic arrangement is one in which the actor appears to be carrying on a conversation with an invisible listener, either over the telephone, or down a dumb-waiter, or the next room, or even right at hand. The second type is a favorite with the skilled monologist in vaudeville, but is not so easy for the amateur. The speaker directly talks to the audience. He is not making a speech in the ordinary sense, but he is telling them

things about himself or apparently anything which comes into his head. The fun depends to an enormous extent on his own personality and the intimacy he establishes with his audience. Beatrice Herford comes to mind as a fine example of the first type, and Will Rogers as a successful exponent of the second.

The "recitation" is not properly a monologue, for the performer is not "talking" but "reading" or reciting selections. A good recitation is always popular, and books of selected poems and other material are occasionally brought out by publishers.

The "tab" or tabloid play is another form used in vaudeville. Its expense depends on its type. The tabloid drama is sometimes a condensed version of some longer play. Or it is a musical comedy condensed to vaudeville length. In any case, the idea of the "tab" is compression and condensation.

### XIII

All of this Second Part will show you that the writer of amateur material has a wide range, in spite of the restrictions and limitations enforced by the nature of his exponents.

One of the best suggestions I can make to the beginner in this field is to send to any of the reputable publishers of such material for a catalogue. There is no surer way of discovering the type and scope of the plays wanted. The reading of the most successful plays along the chosen type will add immeasurably to the particular knowledge necessary.

Remember that though the amateur may not be a Broadway actor as far as his histrionic abilities go, in many cases, especially in the larger cities, he knows something about plays. The publisher is not

going to hand him second-rate material with a view to fooling him. There is a difference between the professional and amateur play. But—you cannot write one unless you are able to write the other.

## THIRD PART

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### AND LASTLY

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#### I

Suppose, now, for the sake of review, we run over a brief list of the things to do, and things not to do. Thus:

#### DO

1. Learn something about the theatre, the stage and acting. It is as necessary as familiarizing yourself with the mechanism of your car if you expect to drive it properly.

2. Remember the usual lack of trained acting ability and experience in the average amateur performer. Keep story and characters within the range of his powers.

3. Remember that the story of your play must be of a single episode or plot.

4. Be sure your story is capable of development in the play-form. Many a good story is spoiled by being told through the wrong medium: Fiction, when it should have been a play; a play, when it needed the slower development of fiction.

5. Remember that your story must have "action." Keep it moving forward steadily.

6. Remember, also, that it must entail some form of conflict, mental, moral, or physical, serious or humorous.

7. Learn to visualize your play as being acted. "See" its people and setting.

8. Use characters suitable to the story and the action. They should be as alive to you as people you have met.

9. Be careful of the names you give your characters. "Mary" is dignified; "Mollie" is a coquette.

10. Arrange for the sequence of the episodes of the play. These sequences must develop naturally and logically.

11. Decide at which point of your story the actual play is to begin.

12. Select the right points of your plot for visible presentation.

✓ 13. Make your conclusion logical.

14. Write business instructions clearly and carefully.

15. Always write business in the present tense.

16. Choose comedy in preference to serious material.

17. Use more women than men, or else an evenly balanced cast; the exceptions would be minstrel shows and similar performances.

18. Use youthful characters as much as possible.

19. Write natural, colloquial dialogue.

20. Write sentences which are easy to speak aloud.

21. Use slang in moderation, and only when necessary for characterization.

22. Be sure that the dialogue of each person in the play is characteristic of that person.

23. Tie up all loose ends.

You see, there are twenty-three Do's, which, together with the first two parts of this manual, ought to be of some little constructive assistance.

## II

Now, let us try some of things which are inadvisable or even prohibited in the play for the amateur.

## DON'T

1. Use stories so simple that they are over before they begin.

2. Use sub-plots. They not only interrupt the action of the real plot, but are out of date. "It isn't being done."

3. Use characters too subtle and complex for the average amateur to portray; nor very unusual types of people.

4. Use "descriptive nomenclature." "Mr. Moneybags" is *passé*, and "I. M. Rich" belongs to burlesque and the joke-book.

5. Start to write your play without some sort of pre-arranged plan.

6. Put anything into your play manuscript which cannot be shown by the actors or the stage-setting, except such matters as may legitimately appear on the printed program of the play, when produced.

7. Have a surprise finish out of keeping with the plot and its development, just for the sake of a "punch." It is a trick which will defeat its own ends.

8. Write plays involving expensive productions. The usual amateur company is looking for amusement, not debts.

9. Give your characters business directions humanly impossible to follow.

10. Write plays around passing fads, partisan politics, religious discussions, or purely local issues.

11. Use depressing themes, sickness, decadence, immorality.

12. Write "star" parts or long plays with only one actor of importance. With amateurs, the whole outfit is important.

13. Use big emotional scenes, lengthy or passionate love-scenes.

14. Require more than two sets of scenery. One is best.

15. Indicate any rapid change of scenery during one act.

16. Provide for any change of costume during an act without writing enough dialogue and business to give time for the change to be made.

17. Use characters requiring difficult make-up.

18. Write didactic or "high-flown" speeches for every-day people. Nobody talks that way, not even bad actors.

19. Use unwieldy words or sentences. They trip up the unwary tongue and cause confusion.

20. Give a character speeches too long to be rendered easily and naturally.

21. Make use of profanity or vulgarity in any form, in any part of the play, in any kind of a play.

22. Introduce irrelevant jokes or discussions into legitimate plays.

23. Use soliloquies or asides. They are distinctly back numbers in modern play-writing.

24. Let your characters talk exactly alike. Very few people do, unless they are imitators.

25. Write of ancient times or exotic lands, requiring elaborate special costumes.

26. Take your plot from any book, story, play or movie.

27. Leave us at the end asking what it all means.

## III

When you have digested the first two parts, and the preceding Do's and Don't's, and all of the other things you ought to read and study and write before your play is ready for its final transcript, we can come to the condition of the manuscript you send to the publisher.

## IV

There are a few slight differences in the preparation of a play MS. intended to be published, and one meant for the professional stage. The former has to reach the printer in such shape that he can readily set it up in type. The latter goes into the hands of a stage-director who uses it as a prompt-book. Also, "parts" are copied from it by stenographers who specialize in that kind of work. Therefore, certain things must stand out more clearly than either the printer or the amateur finds necessary.

There are several matters which are identical in both, and those we will take up first.

Use the typewriter. If you are going to do much writing, it will pay you in the end to rent a machine and learn to use it. In the larger cities there are always to be found typists who will copy the material for you. If your MS. is written clearly and in just the right form, your typist should be instructed to copy the form exactly. If a typewriter is absolutely unavailable, then use the clearest longhand of which you are capable. Publishers are too busy to wade through badly written, slovenly manuscripts.

Write on only one side of the paper. Everyone ought to know that by this time, but one occasionally runs across the exception who never heard it before.

Use good paper. The sort of paper known as onion-skin is not permissible in MSS., as it is partially transparent. Flimsy paper is easily torn. The best size for this purpose is 8½ by 11, or thereabouts.

Use black or very dark ink. If on the typewriter, use a new black record ribbon.

Make carbon copies of your MS., but don't send one of the carbons to the publisher, unless you have used a good carbon paper which copies a clean, clear black.

Leave a margin at the left side. Also, a narrower margin along the right edge is desirable.

Number every page, at center top or upper right-hand corner.

Put the name of the character speaking before every speech. The position of the name varies. In the longer and more important plays, it may be found written above the speech at the center of the page. This is the preferred position for the professional MS., as it sets off the speech and the character speaking it, making it easier for both director and typist to find. In shorter plays and "acts," it may be placed at the left and beginning of each speech. If typed, the name is written all in capitals. If handwritten, underscore it conspicuously.

Every play must be prefaced by a complete list of characters. Every character appearing, from the most important to the least, must find place in this list.

Follow this with an act and scene synopsis. That is, give time and place of each act.

Begin each act with a description of the setting of that act, the furniture and all accessories, together

with the general impression to be conveyed by the surroundings.

Punctuate and capitalize properly. Use the dictionary freely for spelling.

See that your name and address are given in full on the first page of the MS. Also, some writers put the title of the play on every single page of the MS., in the upper right-hand corner. This avoids loss if the pages happen to become separated.

Never roll a manuscript. To do so screams aloud your complete innocence of any experience whatsoever. Send it flat. If it is a short skit of only a few pages it can be sent folded, in a long envelope. If it is a long play, fasten it together and send it unfolded, properly wrapped against damage in transit.

The MS. may be sent by mail or express. See that it is fully prepaid. Also, provide for its return, either by enclosing stamps or having it sent to you by express collect. If a long manuscript, express is cheaper, though a little slower. Manuscripts must be sent sealed as first-class mail.

All of the foregoing are perfectly good rules to be followed when writing for either publisher or manager. We come now to a few variations, points which the publisher prefers for his own particular case.

## V

The amateur not being informed as to the jargon and vernacular of the theatre, is not apt to understand or properly visualize a script filled with abbreviations and other professional short-cuts. Nor do they look well in the printed play-book. Therefore, write out in full your stage directions, and all names wherever

JED. Mis' Chase is expectin' a visitor today.

CHRIS (indifferently, looking at his paper). Yes so I've been told. Someone spoke of it as I was coming down the street.

JED. Do you remember Caselda?

CHRIS (looking up). Perfectly. She was a smart kid. (Looking back at his paper again.) Used to see her around a lot before she went away.

HENRY enters from street door.

CHRIS (having turned at sound of bell). Hello, Henry.

HENRY. Mornin', Mr. Bellows. Just been hearin' about Mis' Chase's old maid niece comin' to Kipp's Falls. Gosh a'mighty -- what do we want another one here for?

JED. We've sure got a lot of old hens 'round this place.

HENRY. Pore old things, I'm kinder sorry for 'em. And now another one. How old is she?

CHRIS (folding up his paper, mentally calculating). Oh, 'bout forty. I used to see her around a lot.

HENRY. Forty! Good Lord! (Looking out.) Scat! Here comes the bunch!

(A murmur outside.)

The door opens and MIRANDA enters, followed by SARAH. Each carries a package.

MIRANDA. Where's Mis' Chase? I brought over my new counterpane for the spare bed. I thought she'd need it.

SARAH. Visitors always need extra things.

The bell tinkles again with ABBY'S entrance, followed at once by EMMA. Both carry packages.

ABBY (smirking and smirking at sight of the men). Oh, good morn-ing, Mr. Bellows.

CHRIS (shortly). Good morning.

ABBY. Howdy, Henry.

HENRY (negligently). Howdy. (EMMA simply smiles at both and goes.)

A Specimen Page of Manuscript Typed for Printing

they appear. Of course, the instruction to write all names out in full has no reference to some especially long name given as it appears in the program. It is the custom to head the speech of each character with the name most frequently used for that character by the rest of the cast. For instance, a man might be listed as "John Wellington Smith, Jr.," in the cast of characters. His speeches could be headed by either "John" or "Smith." But do not head his speeches "J. W. S."

State everything as clearly as possible in the stage descriptions and directions. If you have in mind a particular inflection or "reading" for some phrase or speech, describe just the impression you wish that speech to make. If you have visualized your play in detail, you will want it acted as you saw it. Put into your script all you saw in your mind's eye. It is most helpful to the players and their director; it will also save a deal of editing by the publisher.

If you will inform yourself of these matters by reading printed plays, you will be able to submit a manuscript requiring a minimum of editing. Do not forget if a publisher has to pay an editor to do a lot to your script, it is likely to affect your own check. And your play will have to be worthwhile to be turned over to the editor at all.

Go over all exits and entrances of characters to make sure you have not blundered. If not careful, you may send a character off through a door at right, and then indicate in your MS. his immediate return from left. Get people out of the way; do not jumble them up helter-skelter in a doorway. Of course, a good director can straighten such blunders out, but, why make them? With amateurs, it is not always pos-

sible to secure the services of a good director, and they must do the best they can with your instructions.

Another important point to be noted in the play intended for the printer which is slightly different from the professional MS.: Type with double spacing throughout. This is to leave room for the editor to make notes for the printer, specifying type sizes and styles and other matters which are needed even in the best of manuscripts.

"Business" is always set off in some way from the dialogue. In a professional MS. this is done invariably by indenting it and putting it on a separate line. In a printed play this is not always done. But the business is underlined, preferably in red, and set off by parentheses. When it appears in print, the underlined words are in italics and in parentheses. To print a MS. as the professional types it would make too large a book for amateur purposes.

One more distinguishing point which must be remembered. Always include a brief synopsis of your story. This is not only an aid to the publisher's reader, but if the play is accepted, is used for advertising purposes. In some instances it is also included in the printed play-book as an aid to the amateur selecting a play.

## VI

I have mentioned in several places the length of time a play can run. You may have wondered how this can be judged. In general, we calculate the acting-time of any play, when properly typed, at about a minute to a page. That can only be a rough estimate, of course; but if a manuscript is about fifteen pages long it will in all probability run either

a little less or a trifle longer than fifteen minutes. In the theatre, we never count the number of words in a script for the quite obvious reason that many of the words are used in lengthy descriptions meant only for the director and have no effect on the acting-time at all. But in taking the minute-a-page average, long speeches on one page will balance long descriptions on another, and so on.

It would seem absurdly unnecessary to mention the need for some sort of education in the use of language. But those of us who have any access to the manuscripts of the novice know how often a play—one of literature's most difficult forms—has been attempted by someone with not enough education to write a decent letter. Why not take the trouble to learn good English? If you are an adult with any kind of intelligence, a little application will work wonders.

Also, a number of people to whom English is not a native language, attempt to write in it. It is often difficult for the average newcomer in our tongue who considers himself fluent, to realize that his carefully framed English, in the mouths of supposedly native American characters, sounds exotic and unfamiliar to those of us to whom the speech, slang and all, is second nature. Therefore, take the trouble to learn the language so that its colloquialisms as well as its vagaries are familiar to you, before attempting a play of purely American people on purely American topics.

## VII

I would like to touch briefly on the matter of plagiarism. That means, literally, the appropriation of another's work given out as one's own. This is a

serious matter, and is apt to cause trouble for everyone concerned. It is often done quite innocently by someone ignorant of the impropriety. A novice reads a story; without thinking about it as a fault, he decides the story would make a good play, and proceeds to write it. That is all very well for practice, but if anything is to be done with the play in print or before the public, two things must happen: The original author's name must be mentioned and his written permission obtained. Also, he will probably demand a share of the receipts. To ignore these facts is apt to bring one within the grasp of the law. Never send out a play unless it is your own original creation in all respects.

### VIII

As has been said, this is only a brief manual on a subject requiring a large volume. To know the matter more in detail, it will be necessary for you to refer to some of the more exhaustive books on this and kindred subjects. A short bibliography follows the list of definitions. Usually in the back of each of these reference books will be found mentioned other books.

Also I have suggested the study of a play catalogue, and the reading of popular printed plays.

If I have impressed upon you the necessity for preliminary study and thought, and have convinced you that the work is difficult and success not to be lightly achieved, I have accomplished a little of what I started to do. If in addition you have found anything helpful or suggestive of ways and means, another point has been gained.

Be prepared to re-write and revise frequently and sometimes painfully. For the rest, you are now left to think it over.

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